

Rethinking The Brain

New Insights into Early Development
for parents, caregivers & policy makers

New Insights into brain development suggest that as we care for our youngest children, as we develop policies or practices affecting their day-to-day experience, the stakes are very high. But we can take comfort in the knowledge there are many ways as parents, as caregivers, and as policy makers we can raise healthy, happy smart children. We can take heart in the knowledge that there are many things we as a nation can do, starting now, to brighten young children's future and ours.



Research shows that:

Human development hinges on the interactions between nature and nurture.

- How humans develop and learn depends critically and continually on the interactions between nature (an individual's genetic endowment) and nurture (the nutrition, surroundings, care, stimulation, and teaching that are provided or withheld).
- The impact of environmental factors on the young child's brain development is dramatic and specific, not merely influencing the general direction of development, but actually affecting how the intricate circuitry of the human brain is "wired".

Early care has decisive and long-lasting effects on how people develop and learn, how they cope with stress, and how they regulate their own emotions.

- Babies thrive when they receive warm, responsive early care.
- Warm and responsive care plays a vital role in healthy development.
- Early experiences and attachments shape the child's capacities to control their own emotional states.
- A strong, secure attachment to a nurturing adult can cushion children from the occasional bumps and bruises that are inevitable in everyday life.

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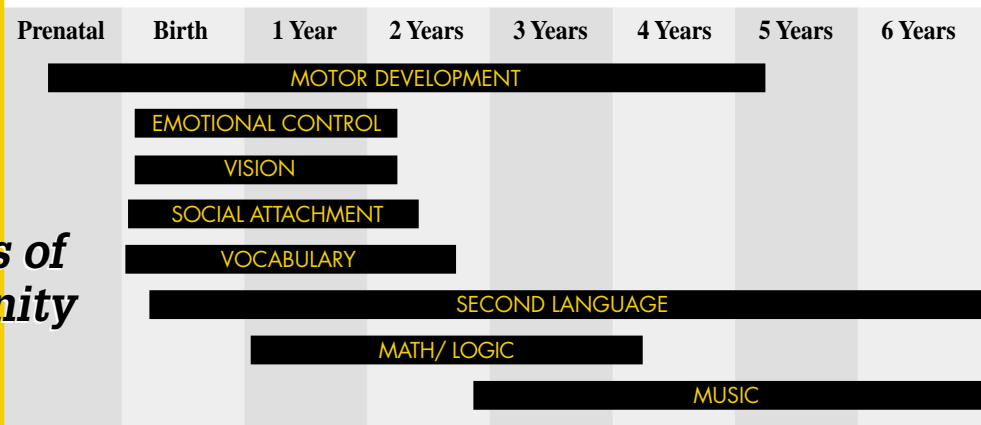
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The human brain has a remarkable capacity to change, but timing is crucial.

- The brain itself can be altered - or helped to compensate for problems - with appropriately timed, intensive intervention. In the first decade of life, the brain's ability to change and compensate is especially remarkable.
- There are optimal periods of opportunity - "prime times" during which the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning.

The Windows of Opportunity



There are times when negative experiences or the absence of appropriate stimulation are more likely to have serious and sustained effects.

- Early exposure to nicotine, alcohol, and drugs may have more harmful and long lasting effects on young children than was previously suspected.
 - Many of these risk factors are associated with or affected by poverty. For children growing up in poverty, economic deprivation affects their nutrition, access to medical care, and the safety and predictability of their physical environment. The level of family stress, and the quality and continuity of their day-to-day care may affect the young child's brain development.

Over the last decade, neuroscientists and child development experts have demonstrated the value of prevention and early intervention.

- Well designed early learning programs created to promote healthy intellectual, emotional, and social development can improve the prospects - and the quality of life - of many children.
- The importance of early intervention has been demonstrated and replicated in diverse communities across the nation.

All parents can benefit from solid information and support as they raise their children

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Where do we go from here:

“First do no harm”

- The principle that guides medical practice should also apply to policies and practices that affect children.
 - Allow parents to fulfill their all-important role in providing and arranging for sensitive, predictable care for their children. Parents need more information about how to choose the kind of care to best support their child and early learning and development.
- Implement policies that support parents in forming strong, secure attachments with their infants in the early months, and make a concentrated effort to improve the quality of early care and learning.

Prevention is best, but when a child needs help, intervene quickly and intensively.

- If children are given timely, intensive help, many can overcome a wide range of developmental problems. To have greatest impact, interventions must be timely and must be followed up with appropriate, sustained services and support.

Promote the healthy development and learning of every child of every age, every demographic description, and every risk category.

- If we miss opportunities to promote healthy development and learning, later remediation may be more difficult and expensive, and less effective.

Implications for policy and practice:

- **Improve health and protection by providing health care coverage for new and expectant parents.**
- **Promote responsible parenthood by expanding proven approaches.**
- **Safeguard children in early care and education from harm and promote their learning and development.**
- **Enable communities to have the flexibility and the resources they need to mobilize on behalf of young children and their families.**

From: _____

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